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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 001569

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SUBJECT: THAI-CAMBODIAN BORDER DISPUTE: TENSIONS INCREASE,
DRIVEN BY NATIONAL POLITICS, BUT GOOD LOCAL COOPERATION

REF: BANGKOK 1487

Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Tensions between Thailand and Cambodia in regard to their border dispute have increased recently after the Thai Cabinet decided to renew its objection to the World Heritage Committee's (WHC) listing of the Preah Vihear temple, based on a unilateral Cambodian submission in 2008, in the run-up to the latest WHC meeting in Seville. Following the Cabinet's decision, Thai officials have noted to us what they believe to be inflammatory comments by Cambodian Foreign Minister Hor Namhong, and both sides had reportedly reinforced troops in the vicinity of the temple area and the 4.6 square km of disputed territory. Deputy Prime Minister Suthep Thaugsuban and Defense Minister Prawit Wongsuwan traveled to Phnom Penh June 27 to meet with Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen to try to ease tensions, and on July 1 the Thai Army confirmed to us that the number of Thai troops in the disputed area would be reduced. The chief Thai negotiator in the Joint Border Committee (JBC) underscored Thai determination to press forward with demarcation activities in less controversial border stretches to build confidence and trust, while stressing that demarcation would take a long time; local officials report good on-the-ground cross-border cooperation with Cambodian counterparts.

¶2. (C) Comment: DPM Suthep's hastily arranged visit with Hun Sen appears to have calmed heightened tensions. The border issue looks to remain a difficult issue for the Abhisit coalition government, however. Critical comments last year by then opposition Democrats and their supporters of the signing of a joint communique in support of the World Heritage Committee's listing of the Preah Vihear temple by the pro-Thaksin party that was in power have backed the Abhisit government into a corner on this issue.

¶3. (C) Comment, cont: With so much of the government's focus on domestic Thai politics, and a full resolution of Thai-Cambodia border disputes years off (given technical challenges in demarcating the rugged terrain) and a lack of political will in both capitals, we continue to believe that the best course of action for the USG is to continue to urge both sides to peacefully solve the border dispute through bilateral talks. To appear to take sides in the matter, or to be seen as pushing for progress faster than the two sides are willing to achieve on their own, could be used for advantage by one side or the other in the current dispute.

We will work with our Defense Attache Office on gathering more information on the Thai military's actions in regard to the border dispute. End Summary and Comment.

DPM SUTHEP'S VISIT WITH HUN SEN EASES TENSIONS

14. (C) Deputy Prime Minister Suthep Thaugsuban and Defense Minister Prawit Wongsuwan June 27 met with Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen in Phnom Penh to address tensions that have intensified after the Thai Cabinet decided June 16 to renew objections to the World Heritage Committee's (WHC) 2008 listing of the Preah Vihear Temple based on a Cambodian petition. Colonel Werachon Sukondhapatipak, Director of the Royal Thai Army's (RTA) Foreign Liaison Division, confirmed for us July 1 that the RTA would reduce the number of Thai troops in the 4.6 square kilometer disputed area as the Bangkok Post had quoted Thai Army Commander General Anupong Paojinda. Anupong said that Suthep, Prawit and Hun Sen had agreed on a troop reduction that would bring the number of troops down to the number in place before the reinforcements had been called after tensions heightened in recent weeks. Werachon pointed out that, while the situation had not returned to normal, tensions were lower so the RTA had decided to reduce the number of troops to signal good will. Werachon had told us June 28 that the RTA had sent a battalion of heavy artillery and a company of special warfare troops to reinforce Thai positions near the temple. Those deployments were in response to recent Cambodian troop increases that included Special Forces soldiers, Werachon said.

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15. (SBU) Tensions between the two nations had increased after the Thai Cabinet decided to renew its objection to the WHC's inscription of the Preah Vihear temple at meetings the week of June 22 in Seville, Spain. Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva publicly reiterated June 26 that Thailand's objection to the Preah Vihear inscription only pertained to the WHC and not Cambodia. Abhisit has said that the temple should be jointly listed so as to promote peace and stimulate economic development in the area. The RTG also claimed that the WHC should re-examine the listing because the Cambodian government had not yet fulfilled the conditions required by the 2008 WHC decision. In particular, the Thai government was concerned that Cambodia had not yet established and convened an International Coordinating Committee (ICC) with Thailand's participation, nor had Cambodia provided relevant information and documents, including detailed maps and the buffer zone of the inscribed property.

RTG CLAIMS CAMBODIAN TROOP BUILDUP

16. (C) The Ambassador raised the ongoing border dispute during a June 22 meeting with MFA Permanent Secretary Virasakdi Futrakul and stressed USG hopes that the conflict would be resolved peacefully and diplomatically. Virasakdi explained that Thailand's contention was with the process by which the WHC had listed the temple in 2008, and that the RTG hoped that a more cooperative approach could be taken.

17. (C) Virasakdi told the Ambassador that the Cambodian military had recently increased the number of troops in the area of the temple. Three thousand Cambodian troops were located within the temple grounds or in the area directly around it, and another five thousand troops were in reserve nearby, he alleged. The troop buildup was alarming to the RTG because it appeared that Cambodian intentions were to achieve a three-to-one advantage over the number of Thai troops. Virasakdi said he had been told by the Thai military that this ratio was necessary to conduct offensive operations against troops that were in defensive positions. Thailand understood that Cambodia had recently sent heavy weapons to the area and the Thai government had heard that Cambodia had

recently asked China for MANPADS, Virasakdi said.

18. (C) Virasakdi told the Ambassador that Defense Minister Prawit had recently discussed the situation with his Cambodian counterpart and had reiterated that Thailand had no intention of raising tensions or provoking further clashes. However, Cambodian Foreign Minister Hor Namhong's June 20 comments that his government welcomes engaging on the issue militarily, diplomatically, and internationally or through peaceful negotiations, but that Cambodia would also welcome further border fighting if Thailand wanted to send troops to Cambodia, were unnecessarily inflammatory, in Virasakdi's view. Virasakdi told the Ambassador that it was possible that Cambodia wished to orchestrate further clashes between the two sides' militaries in hopes of bringing the issue to the UNSC.

JOINT BORDER COMMISSION HOPES FOR EASING OF TENSIONS

19. (C) During a June 26 meeting with Vasin Teeravechayan, Thai Chair of the Thai-Cambodian Joint Boundary Commission (JBC) and retired Ambassador to South Korea, we reiterated USG hopes that the border dispute would be solved through diplomatic means and asked Vasin how long he thought it would take for the JBC to demarcate disputed border stretches. Vasin told us that the basis of the current disagreement was that the Cambodians continued to build residential, commercial, and religious structures in the disputed area around the Preah Vihear temple despite an agreement by the two governments to avoid activities in the disputed 4.6 square kilometers until the border could be demarcated. Cambodia had ignored repeated Thai protests regarding this issue. Vasin said he hoped Suthep's visit with Hun Sen would succeed in toning down inflammatory rhetoric that had emanated from Phnom Penh.

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110. (C) Vasin admitted that the border issue was very sensitive, as the conflict had become subordinate to domestic politics on both sides of the border. For example, in recognition of the political sensitivity of Foreign Minister Kasit Primoya's 2008 forceful comments against Hun Sen on the issue, Vasin's official title had been changed from advisor to the Foreign Minister to advisor to the Foreign Ministry. Vasin stressed that working level relations among JBC members and the military were good. For example, the local Thai and Cambodian military commanders were long-time friends and communicated often.

111. (C) Vasin acknowledged that the RTG and Cambodia approached resolving the problem differently. Thailand hoped to build mutual confidence by addressing demarcation issues along other areas of the Thai-Cambodian border away from Preah Vihear in hopes that success elsewhere along less contentious areas would lead to a more cooperative approach to the disputed area around the temple. In 2009, a joint survey team was to work on the more than 100 kilometers in Sector 5, spanning border pillars 1 to 23 west of Preah Vihear, and possibly start work in Sector 6, covering border pillar one eastward to Preah Vihear. The agreed plan of work in Sector 5 is to find the existing pillars first, create auto-photo maps, agree on a walking survey, and add new border pillars. The process of fixing missing border markers and demarcating the actual 798 kilometer border, based on century old maps of a less-precise scale (1:200,000), 190 kilometers of no border pillars, and the rough terrain would be a lengthy and laborious process, he stressed. Cambodia, however, appeared to have made the border dispute in the area of the temple a high priority in its foreign policy goals, Vasin said.

GOOD RELATIONS AMONG LOCALS ALONG BORDER

¶12. (C) During a June 17-19 trip along the Thai-Cambodian border well to the west and south of the disputed area, we were repeatedly told by government officials, local people, and police and military representatives that relations with Cambodian counterparts were good. Thai Marine Commandant Vice Admiral Suwit Thararoop, the lead for the Thai task force responsible for border security in Chantaburi and Trat provinces, told us that he had a very good relationship with his Cambodian counterparts. For example, the local Cambodian commander had closely coordinated with Suwit to maintain peace and stability at border crossings when clashes broke out last year at Preah Vihear. Furthermore, lower level officials from both countries regularly conduct joint patrols against illegal logging and smuggling, Suwit said. The heart of matter, Suwit said, was politics in Bangkok and in Phnom Penh.

¶13. (C) At Klongyai, on the Thai border with Cambodia's Koh Kong province, the Thai Navy Captain in charge of the local border coordination committee said that relations were good and the two sides' border security officials cooperated closely. In addition, the two sides' navies and fishing industries did not have problems, despite large areas of overlapping sea claims.

¶14. (SBU) In Buriram, a border province closer to Preah Vihear temple, local academics and politicians told us that, despite some nationalistic sentiments among older Thais in the region, the temple issue was not important for local people. The academics told us that people believed that the temple belonged to Thailand because it had been agreed by the French and Siam (Thailand) that the border would be delineated based on the watershed (and locals believed the steep drop-off defined the watershed's edge). Despite this belief, most in Buriram were not interested in pushing the claim, rather they wanted a peaceful resolution soon as this would likely increase tourism in the area.

JOHN